



Capitol Hill's Baby Boom: New Moms Serving in Congress Balance Family, Lawmaking

By: Rick Klien

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But for a select group of women in Congress, there's another job with more demanding constituents.

They're the new moms in Congress, a small but growing caucus of lawmakers who have given birth while in office.

They face challenges just like all working mothers. But for them, the daily grind includes balancing day care and diapers with votes and committee hearings -- all under a constant public glare.

It means juggling "the logistics of coordinating with husbands' schedules, the logistics of the committee hearings, when the votes might be called, when is child care available," said Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, D-S.D., who gave birth to a son, Zachary, in December, just weeks after winning a fourth term in the House.

"I knew it would be a challenge, but it's even more than I anticipated," she said.

There's something of a baby boom in the marble halls of the House and Senate. According to the House historian's office, only seven women in U.S. history have delivered babies while serving in Congress -- and three of those births have happened in the past two years.

Another congressional birth is just weeks away: Rep. Linda Sanchez, D-Calif., is due next month.

She'll have a separate distinction: Sanchez is set to become the first member of Congress giving birth outside of wedlock. At 39, and with a boyfriend of more than two years, she said she knew that having a big wedding could wait, while having a bigger family might not be as easy.

"The window for having a baby was rapidly closing, and the window for marriage was still very much open," Sanchez said. "I don't advocate that that is the right thing in everybody's situation, but in my situation it happened to be the best decision we made."

"There are a lot of single moms and working moms in this country, and I think to the extent that elected [representatives] can reflect the realities of their constituencies, that's a good thing," she said.

The congressional pregnancies reflect a broader shift in politics, with more women running for office earlier in life. More typical in the past has been the experience of politicians like House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, both of whom ran for office after their children were grown.

For the more-recent new moms, it helps to have colleagues who've gone there before. Herseth Sandlin and Congress' other new moms -- including Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash. -- share tips on Washington-area baby bargains and time-saving techniques.

"I remember when I was first expecting, and it was overwhelming. And I was like, 'Is this really going to work?' " McMorris Rodgers said. "And sitting down with other members who have figured out how to balance the demands of the job with being a mom made a difference."

McMorris Rodgers' son, Cole, was born with Down syndrome in 2007. She made the talk-show rounds last year after Gov. Sarah Palin, R-Alaska, was named Sen. John McCain's running mate. Palin's 1-year-old son also has Down syndrome.

"The fact that she has five children and one with Down syndrome -- it is amazing, everything that she has on her plate," she said. "But she has proven that she knows how to do it. [She] knows how within her family to make it work and meet the needs of her children, which I find encouraging."

The new moms are the first to admit that they have an easier time balancing their lives than most working mothers. They have staffs supporting them, and can largely make their own schedules. Also, congressional leaders usually provide months of advance notice about when members need to be in Washington.

They're also benefiting from an atmosphere in the halls of Congress that both Republicans and Democrats see as more family-friendly these days.

When Pelosi became speaker in 2007, the mother of five and grandmother of eight established lactations rooms in all House office buildings, primarily for nursing mothers who serve on congressional staffs.

"It is a real message to working moms and young moms across America that someone who shares their experience and their aspirations for their children is a voice for them in the Congress," Pelosi said.

"For me, it is a very good thing. It is good for our country -- more young moms in Congress, pretty soon more women leaders in the Congress," Pelosi said. "And, who knows, maybe one of these new young moms will be the president of the United States. But the earlier the start, the better the chance."

"I think Congress needs to have moms," McMorris Rodgers said. "When you've been through this experience, it just brings to the forefront a whole host of priorities that you have. And you take this responsibility even more seriously than you did before, because it is your child's future that you are talking about."

But Sanchez has a warning for any future congressional moms. Asked the most difficult thing about being pregnant while serving in the House, she said: "It's the lack of women's bathrooms in the Capitol."